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ABSTRACT

Psychological and historical perspectives on what W.E.B. Du Bois described as "double-consciousness" or "twoness" offer distinct yet complementary viewpoints of the African American experience. A counseling psychologist and an American historian examined the issue of African American identity using an interdisciplinary teaching approach. The incorporation of print and audiovisual media helps reveal the African American experience of oppression, along with the development of identity and the demonstration of resilience. Knowledge of African American history and familiarity with psychological models of cultural identity development are prerequisite to increased therapist cultural sensitivity and multicultural counseling skills. (Contains 33 references.) (Author/JDM)

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Understanding the African-American Experience: An Interdisciplinary, Multimedia Approach

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Poster session presentation at the 109th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco, CA.

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Abstract

Psychological and historical perspectives on what W.E.B. Du Bois described as "double-consciousness" or "twoness" offer distinct, yet complementary viewpoints of the African-American experience. Thus, using an interdisciplinary teaching approach, a counseling psychologist and an American historian examine the issue of African-American identity. The incorporation of print and audiovisual media helps reveal the African-American experience of oppression, along with the development of identity and the demonstration of resilience. Knowledge of African-American history and familiarity with psychological models of cultural identity development are prerequisite to increased therapist cultural sensitivity and multicultural counseling skills.

Understanding the African-American Experience: An Interdisciplinary, Multimedia Approach

The issues of cultural groups historically underserved by mental health professionals have been explored in the literature for almost three decades. In turn, for at least a decade, ethical and accreditation standards have strongly encouraged the incorporation of multicultural issues into the counseling and psychology training curriculum. The literature exploring the teaching of multicultural issues in psychology, however, remains relatively nascent (Reynolds, 1995).

In order to provide a specific example of an approach to teaching about the African-American experience, this poster session describes an ongoing, collaborative effort that uses an interdisciplinary, multimedia approach to help students learn about identity and African-Americans. The material was developed for a graduate level course on multicultural counseling which addresses the issues of racial/ethnic and other minority populations in the United States. The teaching activity requires at least two three-hour class periods.

Framework for Interdisciplinary Teaching

Finding a Colleague and Collaborator

Our teaching activity evolved from a collaboration between a counseling psychologist who teaches a graduate level course on counseling diverse populations and an American historian who teaches undergraduate level courses on United States history from the Civil War to the present including a course on the Civil Rights Movement. In some cases, like this one, a potential collaborator can be someone you already know but have never worked with. In other instances, finding a colleague with expertise that complements yours may take some investigating and networking. In our experience, campus events that promote diversity (e.g., events connected to Black History Month) are an enjoyable way to meet colleagues with shared interests in multicultural issues.

Identifying and Exploring a Key Concept

A recurring theme in African-American literature, poetry, film and music is that of identity. W.E.B. Du Bois in a selection from *The Souls of Black Folk* edited by Hamilton (1975) reflects, "One ever feels his twoness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose

dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (p. 21). He continues, "The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife.... He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face" (p. 21).

For the teaching activity, each of us developed didactic material from our discipline to explore the concept of African-American identity. Topics covered by the historical approach include:

- Slavery and Individual and Collective Resistance (1619-1865)
- Reconstruction: The First Taste of Freedom (1865-1877)
- Segregation in the South and the African-American Response (1880s-1910s)
- Sowing the Seeds for the Civil Rights Movement: The Black Response to Racism (1920s-WWII)
- Overturning Segregation: The Nonviolent Direct Action Civil Rights Movement (1955-1965)
- The Black Power Movement (1965-1970s)
- Fighting Institutional Racism and Economic Inequalities (1970s-Present).

The historical approach sensitizes students to the historical and contemporary realities of racism and efforts to thwart African-American culture. It also underscores the resilience of African Americans.

In turn the psychological approach covers:

- Definitions of Racism, Oppression and Privilege
- Cultural (Black, Minority, White, Cultural Sensitivity) Identity Development and the Issue of Trust in the Therapeutic Relationship
- Recognition of Developmental Competencies in People of Color

The psychological approach builds on the historical approach to enhance students' understanding of the worldview of clients who are African-American. Indeed, the review and discussion of historical events/processes reveal a basis for suspicion and mistrust of European Americans, as well as the evolution of coping strategies that attest to the resilience of African-Americans. Thus, within the context of a history of oppression, a "paranorm" in which an African-American client shows suspicion and mistrust of White

society may indicate effective reality testing, an informed understanding of racism, and the presence of an adaptive and protective mechanism to avoid physical and psychological harm (Sue & Sue, 1990). A client's stage of minority identity development may also impact their comfort with a therapist of a similar or dissimilar background (Atkinson, Morten & Sue, 1998). We maintain that knowledge of African-American history and familiarity with psychological models of cultural identity development are prerequisite to the multiculturally competent counseling with African-American clients.

Providing Links Through Multimedia

The following songs, films, documentaries, and poems are integrated into our lectures and discussions in order to underscore key concepts and provide links between the historical approach and the psychological approach to identity:

Music.
Downhearted Blues (Austin & Hunter, 1923)
Strange Fruit (Allan, 1939)
Respect (Redding, 1965)

Videorecordings.
The Color of Fear (Lee, 1994).
Eyes on the Prize (Blackside, 1986).
Jazz (Burns, & Novick, 2000).
Raisin in the Sun (Susskind, Rose & Petrie, 1961).
True Colors (Lucasiewicz, 1991).

Poetry by Langston Hughes (Rampersad, 1994).
Harlem [2]
I, Too
Merry Christmas
Mother to Son
The Negro Speaks of Rivers
The Weary Blues
Youth

Developing Assignments

Teaching strategies for a multicultural counseling curriculum include reading assignments, writing assignments, modeling/observational learning, introspection and research (Ridley, Mendoza, & Kanitz, 1994). Judiciously selected assignments advance the purposes of multicultural training. These purposes include increasing the multicultural awareness or sensitivity of the participants, examining the issue of diversity

from a sociopolitical perspective, or building a repertoire of multiculturally competent counseling skills (D'Andrea & Daniels, 1991; Reynolds, 1995).

In the past, reading assignments have underscored the didactic material and stimulated discussion. Student response has been especially strong in regard to excerpts from Moody's (1968) autobiography *Coming of Age in Mississippi* and McIntosh's (1995) personal account of white privilege, a corollary aspect of racism. Other assignments have included a personal essay on individual student's own cultural identity, annotated bibliographies of articles on multicultural counseling from professional journals, and case conceptualization and treatment plans generated from case vignettes.

Discussion

Our interdisciplinary, multimedia approach to understanding the African-American experience reflects three years of collaboration and remains a work in progress. As a teaching activity for the psychology classroom, it offers a number of advantages. The didactic information on African-American history and on psychological models of cultural identity development is broad enough to be used with students with varying degrees of historical knowledge and levels of cultural sensitivity. The multimedia components along with the assignments provide opportunities for personal and group reflection. Another advantage is that the approach models openness to learning and to consulting with knowledgeable colleagues. As instructors, we find that the interdisciplinary, multimedia approach broadens our knowledge base and introduces each of us to new and invaluable teaching resources. Finally, we believe the framework could be successfully adapted to teach students about other racial/ethnic minority groups in the United States.

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